View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Louisiana State University

Civil War Book Review

Summer 2017 Article 1

Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles Over The Meaning Of America's Most Turbulent Era

Gaines Foster

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr

Recommended Citation

Foster, Gaines (2017) "Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles Over The Meaning Of America's Most Turbulent Era," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 .
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.3.06
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss3/1

Review

Foster, Gaines

Summer 2017

Ed. Emberton, Carole and Ed. Baker, Bruce E.. *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles Over the Meaning of America's Most Turbulent Era.* LSU Press, $45.00 ISBN 9780807166024

How and Why Americans Remember Reconstruction—and Why They May be Forgetting It

Civil War memory continues to generate public debates, most often over the Confederate flag and Confederate monuments. It has also long attracted the attention of historians who have published a seemingly endless stream of studies on the topic. The construction of the memory of Reconstruction, "one of the major American cultural projects of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries" (8) as W. Fitzhugh Brundage puts in his introduction to this book, has received strikingly less scholarly attention. *Remembering Reconstruction* offers a welcome and important corrective. Its editors, Carole Emberton and Bruce E. Baker, bring together ten essays that discuss varied topics and time periods, but together address four important themes.

First, several of the essays trace the development of the traditional image of Reconstruction and its use by white southerners. K. Stephen Prince argues that in 1890 the North had not yet lost interest in racial change in the South or embraced the South's view of Reconstruction. Over the next two decades "white supremacists used the memory of Reconstruction as a bludgeon—a blunt rhetorical tool that worked best through sheer repetition" (19). The memory they promoted included a myth of Negro domination, the idea that unprepared and uncivilized African Americans dominated and corrupted the South, but "it was also about northern control of the South" (18), what might be called the myth of Carpetbag rule. It was that aspect of memory, Prince rightly points out, that "presented a powerful argument against further federal interventionism" (23).

In another essay on the 1890s, Mark Elliott analyzes what he considers a critical moment in the development of the white supremacist memory of

Reconstruction, meetings at the Mohonk Conference, usually devoted to Indian affairs, which in 1890 and 1891 focused on the "Negro Problem." The conferences "downplayed the importance of black political rights, lamented the mistakes of Reconstruction, and accommodated proslavery ideology." As a result, he concludes, "Republicans in Washington" received "little encouragement to undertake a renewed intervention in the South" (160). In an essay on the late 1930s through the 1960s, Jason Morgan Ward further develops the idea that white southerners employed the memory of Reconstruction to prevent federal intervention in southern race relations.

In a survey of the treatment of the Ku Klux Klan in United States history textbooks, and one of the best essays in the collection, Elaine Parsons also explores the construction of the memory of Reconstruction. She finds interest in the KKK rose in the 1880s, declined in the 1890s, then rose again after 1905. Like Prince, she argues that texts' treatment of the Klan as a necessary response to black political power owed much to pressure by organized white southerners. But her account suggests that white northerners did not have to be bludgeoned; they played a role in creating a white supremacist memory. Elliot agrees, saying that "Northerners were complicit in allowing the mythology about the 'horrors of Reconstruction' to flourish" (139). Parsons, though, goes further. She perceptively observes that the Klan came to "stand for all white-on-black violence, allowing the reader to believe that such violence had geographic and social limits, a beginning, and, most comfortingly, an end" (226). It naturalized and romanticized white racism, "displaced it temporarily as well as spatially from" the readers' "own lives," and rendered it "unrelated to more proximate claims of oppression that might require political response" (225).

The memory that whites constructed did not go unchallenged, however. African Americans developed their own narrative of Reconstruction, a second theme of the collection. Shawn Leigh Alexander analyses how African American journalist T. Thomas Fortune used his memories of Reconstruction and those of others who lived through it "to stress the violence of Reconstruction while demonstrating the resilience of the black community" (62). In an excellent essay on John R. Lynch, Justin Behrend shows that his history, *The Facts of Reconstruction*, also rested on his personal experience. In it, however, Lynch did not stress racial violence or the era's intense political struggles. Instead, he attacked the myth of Negro domination and stressed that Reconstruction brought democracy to the South. Along with elite accounts such as Lynch's, Carole Emberton argues in an intriguing examination of the slave narratives the Federal

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.3.06

Writers Project collected in the 1930s, a very different vernacular memory of the era persisted among African Americans. What she terms "the 'being good' mentality" (124) developed in the midst of "deprivation and fear" (119) during the years after the war. It was rooted in the freed peoples' appreciation of the fact that local whites still maintained power but nevertheless allowed them "a semblance of control over their own lives" (124). In the 1930s interviews, former slaves told stories that focused on "misguided attempts to reform the postwar South, all seasoned with declarations of love for their downtrodden former masters, disdain for impotent 'Yankees,' and sharp criticism for 'biggity' freedpeople" (111). These three essays at once reveal the power of whites to influence how blacks portrayed Reconstruction but just as surely demonstrate the persistence of a distinctive African American memory of it. The essays thereby complicate an understanding of the rise of the dominant memory. If the white South's views did not go unchallenged, then northerners clearly chose to accept it, which reaffirms the case for their complicity.

Although still addressing issues of racism, three other essays place the memory of Reconstruction in an international context, the third and perhaps newest theme of the book. Elliott's essay argues that the myth of Negro domination influenced the new American empire created after the Spanish-American War, which was built upon "the presumption that an extended, open-ended period of white tutelage had to precede self-government" (166). Natalie J. Ring describes what she terms a "New Reconstruction" (174), in which turn-of-the century Progressives sought to address the serious problems in the South through "the use of the regulatory state and guided by social scientific theory" (178). Treating the first Reconstruction as a failure, these reformers distanced their efforts from it by "drawing comparisons between the region and overseas colonies of other countries" and then framing their efforts at "southern readjustment, both implicitly and explicitly, in the context of colonialism and transnational reform" (183). Looking at a slightly later period, Samuel L. Schaffer argues that Woodrow Wilson's memory of the South's experience after the Civil War influenced his search in World War I for a just, non-punitive peace as well as his support for the postwar colonial mandate system. Wilson had concluded that Reconstruction showed that "dark-skinned peoples untrained in freedom could not be left on their own" (215). Both Schaffer and Ring acknowledge that their subjects rarely mentioned Reconstruction, a silence that raises questions about how direct and important an influence its memory was. And putting Reconstruction in an international

context raises an even more interesting question. Imperialism seemed to be most influenced by a version of the myth of Negro domination; the lesson drawn from Reconstruction was that whites needed to exercise control. Yet Americans, southerners in particular, could easily have compared colonialism to another theme of the memory of Reconstruction, northern control of the South. Why did the memory of Reconstruction not lead more Americans to condemn colonialism as another attempt at Carpetbag rule?

Only one of the essays directly addresses the book's fourth theme, one Brundage describes as "the erosion of the power of Reconstruction memory to mobilize Americans" (10). Bruce Baker finds that during the 1970 South Carolina Sesquicentennial local historical celebrations, with a few exceptions, ignored Reconstruction, in large measure because race relations at the time were better than ever before or since. Other authors, however, touch on the diminished public interest in Reconstruction. Ward argues that in the post-World War II years use of Reconstruction memory continued but its political impact diminished. And Parsons shows that in textbooks the old stories of the Klan had been excised, although romantic echoes remained.

In developing all four themes, *Remembering Reconstruction* makes a major contribution. Perhaps the fact that Reconstruction no longer has the emotive powers it once had helps explain why historians have devoted so much more attention to Civil War memory, over which disputes continue. Why does the Civil War command greater public interest than Reconstruction? It may be, in part, because there are so many physical reminders of the war--monuments and the Confederate flag--that evoke such passions. Reconstruction has left far fewer artifacts over which to fight. But the nature and function of the memory of Reconstruction may play a role as well. Opposition to the federal government certainly has become stronger in recent years, but with national conservative opposition to it and southern Republican influence in Washington, it is hard to see the relevance of the myth of Carpetbag rule. And the myth of Negro domination may be too explicitly racist for modern sensibilities. Defending Confederate symbols may allow an assertion of white identity without, as Parson puts it about the Klan, "confronting an enduring problem that demanded political response."

Gaines M. Foster teaches history at Louisiana State University. His latest contribution to the endless stream of studies of Civil War memory, "What's Not in a Name: The Naming of the American Civil War," is forthcoming in The

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.3.06

Journal of the Civil War Era.